

Dam road's closure takes toll in Folsom

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In a reversal of fortune, Folsom's traffic has steadily worsened since the closure of Folsom Dam Road two weeks ago -- going from an initial light increase the first week to a torrent of thousands more vehicles.

According to the latest city traffic counts this week, 46,200 vehicles are driving over the narrow Rainbow Bridge daily, up from 36,700 before the closure. And 34,800 vehicles are using Lake Natoma Crossing, an increase of about 2,000.

Folsom Dam Road had carried about 18,000 vehicles a day, meaning that thousands of drivers now, as originally feared, are snaking through the city's narrow streets in search of shortcuts to destinations in El Dorado, Placer and Sacramento counties. "It's a nightmare," said Trina Burton, who was pumping gas at the Chevron station at Folsom-Auburn Road and Greenback Lane on her way from Folsom to Roseville. "It took 15 minutes to get through Rainbow Bridge. It's nuts."

Folsom Mayor Steve Miklos is well aware of the problem. "It's a nightmare of a situation, and it's not going to get better anytime soon," he told the City Council last week.

The Bureau of Reclamation closed the two-lane road atop the 480-foot-tall dam late last month because of concerns of potential terrorist activity. Failure of the dam would inundate a huge area downstream, threatening the safety of hundreds of thousands of Sacramento residents.

To handle the anticipated increase in traffic, Folsom crews initially adjusted traffic signals to allow longer green lights at potential problem spots. Police and California Highway Patrol officers monitored major intersections, a CHP aircraft kept an aerial watch and motorists were urged to use alternate main routes outside the city. But after the largely trouble-free first week, both city police and the CHP discontinued their watches.

One of the few aids to motorists is a message board on southbound Folsom-Auburn Road that urges drivers to use the larger Lake Natoma Crossing bridge instead of Rainbow Bridge.

City officials don't know what else they can do immediately to alleviate the congestion. "I think we have done everything we can do right now," said city traffic engineer Mark Rackovan.

A traffic study is planned for this spring to evaluate the city's roadways, but mainly is for long-term purposes.

Among other ideas that could offer relief, city officials want to purchase an "intelligent transportation system," a program with cameras and sensors providing

real-time traffic information that would be transmitted to message boards alerting motorists to delays and suggesting alternative routes.

In the meantime, the increase of traffic along Rainbow Bridge and Riley Street is slowing down business in Old Folsom.

Judy MacGregor, owner of Fire and Rain Gallery, a specialty home-furnishing store on Sutter Street, said her business is starting to feel pinched. She said she has just spent two years recovering from the financial loss her business suffered when a dam gate broke in 1995 and the road was closed for most of the next two years.

MacGregor said she would at least like to see police direct traffic at Sutter and Riley streets so those who want to turn onto Sutter Street can do so safely.

However, police spokeswoman Sharon Blackburn said that type of assistance is not being considered at this time.

In another part of town, Coffee Republic has lost 50 regulars, said owner Bob Leaf. "We miss our regular customers," he said. "In this business, you think of your guest as family. You see people five times a week before caffeine, you get to know them."

In an effort to attract new commuters to the shop, Leaf posted a sign along Folsom-Auburn Road offering a free cup of coffee to new customers. Only one person had accepted the offer.